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Editorial: Forced Migration in Southeast Asia

Gunnar Stange & Patrick Sakdapolrak

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The current issue of ASEAS, 11(2), focuses on the highly topical theme of forced migration in Southeast Asia. Historically, the region is known for the so-called boat people crisis in the aftermath of the Vietnam War between 1975 and 1995, when almost 800,000 Vietnamese fled their country by sea in fear of persecution. Currently, Southeast Asia is experiencing its second major forced migration crisis with nearly one million Rohingya people who have fled Myanmar in fear of an ongoing genocide committed by the Armed Forces of Myanmar (Tajuddin, 2017). Thus far, we know little about the current state of refugees and internally displaced persons in Southeast Asia, and we have only estimations on the actual number of people that migrate involuntarily to or within the region. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports approximately 3.37 million of the 68.5 million forced migrant population worldwide were hosted by Southeast Asian countries in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). At the same time, in 2017, Southeast Asian countries accounted for nearly six million internally displaced persons (IDP) due to ongoing domestic armed conflicts, recurring natural disasters, as well as aggressive developmental politics (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2018).

Southeast Asia has one of the weakest protection frameworks for refugees and asylum seekers worldwide. Only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol. Although the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration mentions ASEAN's and its member states' commitment to guarantee the right to seek asylum (ASEAN, 2013), thus far, the member states' way to address the issue of forced migration has been rather unilateral. This is mainly due to ASEAN's very strong rules of cooperation, namely respect of state sovereignty, non-interference in the international affairs of member states, consultation, and consensus (Amer, 2009). At this point, it is highly unlikely that ASEAN and the region as such will decide to adopt a joint regional framework for, or approach to forced migration any time soon (Petcharamesree, 2016).

Thus far, there exists only very limited knowledge on how the low protections standards in most Southeast Asian countries specifically affect the lives of refugees and asylum seekers and their coping and adaptation strategies respectively. The contributions to this issue address this research gap as they are primarily concerned with the question of how the life realities of refugees and asylum seekers are being shaped in socio-political environments that have no or very low protection standards for this highly vulnerable 'group' of persons of concern. This includes themes such as self-organization in the absence

of access to education, registration practices in the absence of asylum frameworks, as well as refugees and asylum seekers management practices on the municipal level in the absence of support from the national level of government.

The Current Research section of this issue opens with a contribution by Thomas Mitchell Brown (2018) focusing on refugee-led education initiatives in Cisarua, a small town in West Java, Indonesia. Based on ethnographic research, the author documents refugee resilience and self-reliance, tracing the emergence of refugee-led education initiatives, detailing their form, function, and benefits to the community, and analyzing the contextual factors that drove their emergence and proliferation. The article is an important contribution to understanding the living conditions and needs of an estimated 14,000 asylum seekers and refugees who live in protracted transit in Indonesia due to the restrictive Australian immigration policy in recent years. Brown shows that although refugees are oftentimes portrayed to be passive agents in need of outside assistance, they are, in fact, highly capable of constructively addressing their collective needs.

In her article, Jera Lego (2018) scrutinizes the politics and practices of refugees' and asylum seekers' registrations in Malaysia and Thailand. Based on extensive field work, Lego traces the cases of registration exercises along the Thai-Myanmar border and mobile registration in Kuala Lumpur until around 2013. In doing so she analyses the mechanisms and technologies employed by the UNHCR in cooperation with non-governmental organizations for registering and identifying refugees from Myanmar. Lego argues that both the registration and non-registration of refugees and asylum seekers can be understood in terms of competing rationalities of the various actors involved, their incongruent programs, and uneven technologies that serve to actively construct and assert knowledge and information concerning the existence of refugees, or to conceal and deny their presence.

Antje Missbach, Yunizar Adiputera, and Atin Prabandari (2018) focus on the sub-national level of refugee protection in Indonesia. Their article responds to changes initiated by the 2016 Indonesian Presidential Regulation on Handling Foreign Refugees, which delegated more responsibility for managing refugees to the sub-national levels of the administration. The authors discuss the case of refugee management in the city of Makassar, known for its welcoming attitude towards refugees. By examining the current living conditions of asylum seekers and refugees in Makassar and comparing them to other places in Indonesia, the authors ask whether the concept of 'sanctuary city' is applicable in a non-Western context to enhance current discussions of creating alternative models for refugee protection beyond the national and regional level.

Claudia Seise's (2018) contribution goes beyond the specific thematic focus of this issue as it refers to the broader historical context of migration to Southeast Asia, and in this case to Indonesia. In her article, she looks at Maulid celebrations – held to remember the Prophet Mohammad's birthday – among the *Alawiyin* in Palembang, South Sumatra, who are descendants from Hadhrami immigrants. Maulid celebrations organized by the *Alawiyin* in Palembang are separated along gender lines. The author shows how female-only Maulid celebrations enable Muslim women to express their emotions and allow for bodily expressions during the actual Maulid event. Seise argues that, in these celebrations, women express the religious emotions that they

wish to show, but also express those emotions that are expected from them as signs of their love for the Prophet Muhammad. Emotional practices, such as these, Seise argues, are part of an understanding of Islam internalized by the Alawiyyin.

The In Dialogue section features an interview with the Indonesian peace and conflict advisor Shadia Marhaban on conflict transformation in Southeast Asia, conducted by Gunnar Stange (2018) in Vienna, in June 2018. Shadia Marhaban speaks about her peace-building work all over Southeast Asia and her experiences in violence prevention work in the city of Marawi, Mindanao, Philippines, in the aftermath of the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people during the so-called siege of Marawi in 2017.

In the Network Southeast Asia section, Kristina Großmann (2018) reports on the kick-off workshop of the transdisciplinary research project “FuturEN: Governance, Identities, and Future Along Categories of Differentiation” in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The project explores environmental conflicts, especially those related to coal mining, focusing on the nexus between ethnicity, gender, and status in Central Kalimantan. The workshop aimed at discussing diverging future visions regarding coal mining on an intersectoral expert level. Großmann finds that the participants mainly profited from the space for exchange and networking that the workshop provided. The challenge, however, for a similar workshop to be held in the future will be to achieve a stronger involvement of actors from the local private mining sector.



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